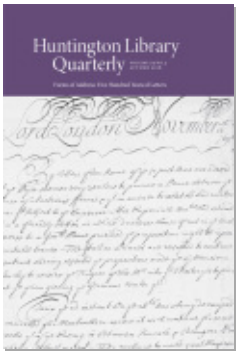
How Letters Matter

Jason Scott-Warren



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REVIEW

How Letters Matter

Jason Scott-Warren

James Daybell and Andrew Gordon, editors
Cultures of Correspondence in Early Modern Britain
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AT A KEY POINT IN THE PLOT of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's historical novel *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*), the Prince of Salina, Sicily, receives a letter from his nephew Tancredi, asking him to negotiate the terms of his marriage with the beautiful Angelica, daughter of the local mayor. Delivered by a "stage-coach bearing the irregular and scanty mail" in its "canary-yellow box," the letter "proclaimed its importance even before reading, written as it was on sumptuous sheets of gleaming paper and in a harmonious script scrupulously tracing full strokes down and thin strokes up."[1] A fair copy, the letter is addressed respectfully to "dearest Uncle Fabrizio," rather than employing Tancredi's more habitual, mocking sobriquet ("Zione" in Italian, "Nuncle" in the English translation). This means that it can be shown to others, and (the narrator informs us) it also forges "a link with ancient pre-Christian beliefs which attributed a binding power to the exact invocation of a name." The body of the letter pours forth Tancredi's love for Angelica in effusive terms ("it should not be forgotten that romanticism was then at high noon") before proceeding to a disquisition on the value of leveling the classes at this turning point in Italian history (the year is 1860). This is the only part of the composition that pleases the prince, partly because it chimes with his own political notions but also because "the style, with its hints of subdued irony, magically evoked his nephew's face, the jesting nasal tone, the sparkling sly blue eyes, the mockingly polite smile." Furthermore, he notes that "this little Jacobin sally had been written out on exactly one single sheet of paper so that if he wanted he could let others read the

1. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard,* trans. Archibald Colquhoun (London, 2007), 71–72; *Il Gattopardo: Edizione conforme al manoscritto del 1957* (Milan, 1969), 97–98.

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letter while subtracting the revolutionary chapter." "His admiration for Tancredi's tact knew no bounds."

For those who see the history of letter writing as a story of continual decline, the Prince of Salina might seem to be living in the ancien régime of correspondence as well as the twilight of the aristocracy. With its beautiful paper, elegant handwriting, and polished style, its quasi-magical power to conjure up the writer and perhaps to control the reader, and its presumption that it will be shared in whole or part, the letter belongs to an alien world—a world in which people appear to have the time to communicate. Letter writing is often said to be one of the many art forms that we are in danger of losing in the transition to digital technology. But despite the gulf that yawns between our hurried emails and the artful missives of previous generations, we are nonetheless aware that letters require all kinds of tact. Pressing the "send" button, we are haunted by stories of emails accidentally fired off to the wrong account, of private "replies" that were unwitting "reply alls," of messages that were misinterpreted or that struck precisely the wrong tone. If my overstuffed inbox is anything to go by, reports of the death of the letter are greatly exaggerated. Yet our sense of being overwhelmed by correspondence does little to mark us out from past eras, in which letters could be quite as pressing and oppressive as they are today.

This complex interplay between continuity and change goes some way to explaining why interest in early modern letters has been growing in recent years, such that we now have several painstaking studies of letter writing in theory and practice, and an increasing array of digital resources that bring the archive to our desktops. Such studies have coincided with the "material turn" in the humanities and have insisted that letters were anything but a disembodied conversation between absent friends. Instead they were messy congeries involving numerous collaborations with secretaries and messengers, complex protocols of epistolary theory, social etiquette, and tacit knowledge, and endless anxieties about the future fate of the document. Merely to write a letter in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries required extraordinary reserves of material literacy—the ability to wield paper, ink, letterforms, words, blank spaces, folds, seals, and silk to full effect. Studies such as Alan Stewart's *Shakespeare's Letters* (2008) or James Daybell's *The Material Letter in Early Modern England* (2012) begin by itemizing the nuts and bolts of writing, rubbing our noses in the oddity of the material stuff in order to begin the task of historicist estrangement.[2] Such accounts make us aware that the letter that Tancredi sent to the Prince of Salina was in fact a pretty modern beast—probably written on wove, machine-made paper rather than laid paper made by hand, penned with a steel pen rather than a quill, and sent in an envelope rather than folded and sealed in the manner of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century missives. But does any of this empirical detail (which does not figure in the novel's extensive description of the letter) really matter? At what point does the physical detail cease to be relevant and become simply "too much information"? What

2. Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare's Letters* (Oxford, 2008); James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512–1635* (Basingstoke, U.K., 2012).

exactly do we mean by this buzzword *material*, and what difference does materiality make to the study of the early modern letter?

Cultures of Correspondence in Early Modern Britain, a beautifully produced contribution to the University of Pennsylvania Press's flagship "Material Texts" list, furnishes a perfect opportunity to think about such questions. In their lucid introduction, the editors, James Daybell and Andrew Gordon, begin to stretch the notion of the material, promising that they will decode "the social materiality of letter writing, in other words, not only the physical features of letters but also the social and cultural practices of manuscript letter writing and the material conditions and contexts in which they were produced, disseminated and consumed" (5). This totalizing vision seems to me to be an attempt to compress the three main axes along which letters are currently being plotted: the material (which attends to their physical features), the rhetorical (which focuses on literary and cultural codes, engaging at the level of "content"), and the social (which considers the ways in which interpersonal relationships inflect and are inflected by the letter). Of course, it is hard to disentangle these terms. Should we think of a carrier, driving his cart between London and Norwich, say, as a social agent, or as part of the material infrastructure of letter writing? Can we write about the rhetorical—a writer's style—without analyzing the material—including their stylus or quill? What struck me in reading the essays collected in *Cultures of Correspondence,* essays written by an array of leading scholars in the field, was that for all the explicit emphasis on the material, it was the social that came to feel dominant.

The book begins with a section entitled "Material Practices," comprising two essays that contrast massively in scale. The first of these to some extent fulfills the prescription that books about letters must begin by pressing us up against the material. Jonathan Gibson homes in on the individual letters that made up a letter, offering a minute analysis of the development of the italic hand in England in the later sixteenth century, as it moved from an angular form derived from the writing manuals of Giovambattista Palatino to a more rounded form derived from the works of Giovan Francesco Cresci. Then Mark Brayshay presents an account of the multifarious methods by which letters were delivered in the period, via a developing network of physical staging posts that arose thanks to several historical staging posts—most notably those of 1512, when Sir Brian Tuke was appointed the first "master of the posts," and of 1635, when the system of standing posts established for government business was opened up to the public, creating the first English postal system. The stark contrast between the essays is visible in their illustrations; Gibson shows us how a cross-stroke, a downstroke, and a fine diagonal line come together to make an elegant italic *d*, whereas Brayshay provides maps of England and Wales. What the essays have in common is their desire to trace change over time. Perhaps there is a deeper connection here, too, since Gibson emphasizes that the Palatinian italic lost authority because it was (in Cresci's words) "too lethargic and slow" (40); a more cursive, forward-leaning italic satisfied the need to combine prestige with speed (or the appearance of speed). Joined-up writing and what Brayshay has elsewhere called the "joined-up realm" may have

been developing in tandem, as part of an interlocking system.[3] To this extent, it feels reasonable to call them "material practices."

The second section, entitled "Technologies and Designs," focuses on the encryption, decryption, and purloining of letters, and here things become significantly more social and cultural. Nadine Akkerman kicks things off with a case study in the letters of Elizabeth Stuart, Queen of Bohemia, exploring the pervasive use of ciphers in letters that she wrote and received. Although she was in close contact with several master cryptographers, including Constantijn Huygens, Elizabeth's ciphers were relatively unsophisticated—"based on a rudimentary substitution system, monoalphabetic and thus fairly easy to break" (75)—and remained in use over many years. Ciphers did not truly guard secrets, Akkerman argues; rather their sharing was part of a social ritual that defined whether one was part of the intimate circle around the queen. The kinds of game playing involved in ciphering could cement the relationship between writer and recipient, who became (in Donne's phrase) "inter-assured of the mind," but they also fanned outward as letters were circulated among members of a political community. Akkerman sees the cipher as part of the wider culture of enigma, in a period when it was thought that "the pleasure of solving riddles had a medicinal value, as a treatment against melancholy" (82).

Next, in a long and knotty essay, Andrew Gordon unpicks the ways in which correspondence was counterfeited in the early modern period, proposing that illicit imitations can help to reveal what a letter was: "we can find in forgeries a conception of both how a letter ought to look and how it ought to operate in the world" (87). Focusing initially on letters investigated in the course of Star Chamber trials, his examples are mostly formal, practical letters attesting to the support or endorsement of powerful individuals (the early modern equivalent of job or character references). As he goes on to explore the place of counterfeit correspondence in treason trials, Gordon reminds us that early modern inquisitors could be quite as materially minded as modern cultural historians; in one vignette, Richard Topcliffe and Thomas Norton are shown analyzing "the freshnese of ink, and cleanesse of paper" (99) to assess the authenticity of a missive, while another shows us Sir John Perrot protesting at an attempt to incriminate him via a poor forgery, "written in English but of Irish orthography a very foolish style, the hand not good, the counterfeit of my hand as ill, the paper worse and neither my private or ordinary seal of arms thereunto" (96). After a brief analysis of dramatic plots based on "the vulnerability of the early modern letter to subversion" (100), Gordon investigates the labyrinthine complexities that surround John Daniell's purloining of letters written by the Earl of Essex and his commissioning of forged copies from the writing master and "Cypherary" Peter Bales. The case is almost as impenetrable as the earl's handwriting—described as being "as hard as any kypher to those that are not thoroughlie acquaunted therewith" (103)—but Gordon convincingly argues that this is another attempt "to exploit letters as an instrument to incriminate individuals, mar-

3. Mark Brayshay, *Land Travel and Communication in Tudor and Stuart England: Achieving a Joined-Up Realm* (Liverpool, 2014).

keting intelligence materials to promote prosecution" (108). An intense engagement with the materiality of the letter is fueled by a desire to change the social landscape—by taking someone out of it.

Finally in this section, Andrew Zurcher explores the relationship between letter writing and factionalism in the life and works of Sidney and Spenser. He begins by juxtaposing a purloined letter that is crucial to the revised *Arcadia* with Sidney's personal jumpiness about the security of his own correspondence; in a gripping missive sent to his father's secretary, he threatened to "thruste my Dagger into yow" if any more of his letters came "to the eys of some" (112). Zurcher goes on to show how the period's factional politics were managed through the manipulation of correspondence networks. Edmund Spenser had direct experience of this sort of epistolary scheming as a servant of Lord Grey in Ireland in the early 1580s, and the experience filtered into *The Faerie Queene* of 1590–96, influencing particular details of the plot and the broader structure of an allegory that constantly divides readers into insiders or outsiders—those who can decode the "cipher" and those who cannot—or polarizes them along factional lines. The essay resonates richly with Gordon's analysis of the use of letters to frame rivals as traitors and with Akkerman's account of the social plenitude that could gather around the emptiest of textual secrets. But in this section it seems that the "material" matters in so far as it can be exploited for alliance or enmity.

The third section takes on "Genres and Rhetorics," focusing on the second axis of our imagined graph: the rhetorical. First in this section is an absorbing essay by Lynne Magnusson that notes "the ubiquity in the Tudor grammar schools of the letter genre, with the Ciceronian epistle as its chief exemplar" (137), and attempts to assess the impact of scholarly training on vernacular epistolary culture. It does this by contrasting letters written mostly in the 1570s and 1580s by two members of the Herrick family—one (John) an ironmonger's apprentice, the other (Tobias) a schoolboy and university student who would subsequently take holy orders. John produces deferential, workaday letters that follow a standard late medieval template, focused on material concerns ("my mother geueth yow harty thankes for her cowcombar which yow sent hir" [142]) and capable of some material playfulness: the addition of decorated letters and ink drawings, and some elegant paper-folding. Tobias creates a number of "Cicero effects," most notably in the way that the letter dramatizes itself as a conversation between equals and buttonholes the reader by anticipating responses and replying to imagined interjections. This hectoring Ciceronian mode was, Magnusson suggests, radically inappropriate to the hierarchical situation in which Tobias found himself and became more glaringly so as his fortunes fell. In this way a humanist educational formation could become a "malformation" (154), since it encouraged students to believe in the magical efficacy of style in ways that might have bamboozled or offended those who were not steeped in Cicero, Petrarch, and Erasmus.

The essay that follows is less about rhetoric and genre than about identity, and is in a way the most grimly physical of all the contributions to the book. The words of Shakespeare's mutilated Titus Andronicus—"O handle not the theme, to talk of hands, / Lest we remember still that we have none" (3.2.29–30)—echoed in my mind as I read

Christopher Burlinson's essay on John Stubbs, whose right hand was famously cut off after it penned a pamphlet objecting to Queen Elizabeth's proposed marriage to the Duke of Alençon and Anjou. Following his truncation, hands were handled a great deal in letters written to and from Stubbs, which repeatedly riffed on the relationship between hand and heart. Burlinson shows that Stubbs not only started to write with his left hand, working as a secretary for Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby, but he also refashioned himself as a "left hand writing" (158). He signed off his letters as "John Stubbe Scaeva," where "Scaeva" means "left-handed" but perhaps alludes also to Livy's story of Gaius Mucius Scaevola, who thrust his right hand into a fire as a show of stoical strength. But was it Stubbs who called himself Scaeva, or was it his friends? Burlinson attends closely to the endorsements on Stubbs's letters, arguing that this identity was to some extent a communal construction, like Akkerman's cyphers or Zurcher's allegories another creation of the in crowd. If this brings things round to the social, the intensity of the essay's focus on the hand (including the introduction of an unusual Dutch letterform in Stubbs's left-handed script) suggests the intimacy between the rhetorical and the bodily in the period.

Such considerations also inflect Michelle O'Callaghan's essay on the vituperative letter, which explores the way in which "letters of affront" negotiate gendered codes of civility and decorum. Beginning with the efforts of Sir Francis Bacon to keep the moral high ground in an epistolary assault on his enemy Sir Edward Coke, O'Callaghan moves on to consider the more risky strategy of Lady Bridget Willoughby in sending a violent letter to a friend of her father who had sown discord in the family (in part by the fabrication of letters). Next she examines a spectacularly abusive letter from Christopher Brooke to Lady Eleanor Davies (which promises that "if I meete thee in the vacation, assure thy selfe, I will kick thee & scratch a mynced pye for a dogg from thy ill kept filthy dunghill arse" [180]); this she reads as a quasi-literary outpouring that sought onward manuscript circulation, chiming with the fashion for Juvenalian satire. O'Callaghan concludes by exploring the epistolary dueling between Lady Mary Wroth and Sir Edward Denny, which had its origins in apparently libelous passages in Wroth's *Urania*. If O'Callaghan's is the most purely rhetorical and social analysis in the volume, with very few references to material aspects of the letter and no illustrations, there is nonetheless plenty of bodiliness on display in the lewd scatology of Brooke and the frequent threats of violence and occasional resort to cursing in other cited letters. Again, though, it feels as though what is really at stake is the social. The essay's clearest links are to the essays in the second section of the volume, with vituperation joining ciphering or forgery as a mode of intervening in interpersonal relations.

The final section of the book addresses "The Afterlives of Letters" and the crucial question of how the epistolary archive has been constituted—a question largely plotted along the material and social axes of my imagined graph. Arnold Hunt initiates proceedings by assembling an impressive anthology of letters that (somewhat paradoxically) include an instruction to burn them. While Hunt recognizes that such instructions could be rhetorical and designed to strengthen the intimacy of sender and recipient, he also sees them as linked to genuine insecurities about the exchange of

secret information at times of factional crisis and political instability. The Essex Rebellion, the Addled Parliament, and the dissolved Parliament of 1626 all prompted a rash of anxiety among letter writers, which registered in some extended reflections on the protocols of epistolary security. Hunt documents the increasingly popular practice of separating the "official" and "private" elements of the letter, with the latter to be kept secret, returned to the sender, or burnt after reading. (Compare Tancredi's composition of "the revolutionary chapter" on a single separable sheet of paper). As the archiving of letters became more institutionalized, so too did the distinction between missives that were intended for posterity and those that were to be filed by what the Caroline newswriter John Pory called "the safest secretary in the world, the fire" (205). The fact that letters tended to travel in multiple packets, and that some of them were intended for destruction, means that "reconstructing early modern correspondence can very often feel like trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle with an unknown number of missing pieces" (206). It also means that we may have an incomplete picture, which fails to document the kinds of intimacies that were possible in those early modern letters that were strictly time limited, like pictures on Snapchat.

James Daybell's essay carries forward the discussion of archival survival in relation to women's letters. While women were involved in early modern record-keeping, much of this related to "safeguarding papers for everyday use rather than future-proofing them for posterity" (212). Daybell explores three collections of female-authored correspondence that, against the odds, survive to the modern day. The first, a volume of the Talbot papers entirely devoted to women's letters, was compiled in the later seventeenth century by a couple of local antiquaries from heaps of papers that had been left to molder in a hunting lodge. The volume represents an exception to the generally chronological arrangement of the Talbot papers, and Daybell infers from it a desire to separate private from public matters, both of which were of interest to the antiquarian. His second example, the letters of Lady Mary Baskerville (d. 1632), were preserved by her son Hannibal as part of a mixed collection of family documents that was annotated in order to form a personal and familial history, in which the son aimed to set straight the record of his mother's turbulent life. Daybell's third case concerns the letters of Lady Margaret Clifford, as archived by her daughter Anne, whose role in the "construction of a transgenerational memory" (224) is well known. Anne annotated the letters and transcribed some of them into a letterbook, which is now witnessed only by an eighteenth-century transcription probably made by the Duchess of Portland. That the duchess can be shown in some cases to have creatively embellished the record casts doubt on the authenticity both of this particular archive and on various other key sources for Clifford's life. Daybell concludes by emphasizing the need to be sensitive to the way in which letters "acquired new meanings as they moved between archives" (235).

Setting the final seal on the collection, Alan Stewart (who is also the volume's dedicatee, hailed as "Erasmus in NYC") proposes to look at letters in terms of neither their content nor their materiality, but rather via "the *places* they occupy" (238). How are we to understand the collection of documents that we confront in *State Papers*

Online, a resource that amalgamates national archives and private collections such as the Cecil Papers at Hatfield House and the Cotton and Yelverton Papers in the British Library? The story that Stewart unfolds is one of slippery distinctions between public and personal papers, and of intense competition between archivists and antiquarians both to gather precious documents into their collections and, once acquired, to keep them (literally) in the family. A detailed reconstruction of the rivalries between Robert Cotton and Thomas Wilson, keeper of the records at Whitehall, shows that modern characterizations of them ("Wilson . . . supposedly a public records man, Cotton a private collector" [249]) are simplistic. "The line that supposedly separates public from private, state from family, is by no means a given, but one that is constantly confused and contested in the period" (251). Like the essays by Hunt and Daybell, this discussion is "material" in that it is about letters as a physical resource that needs to fall into the right hands, but it is also intensely engaged with interpersonal politicking. We might suspect that the truly public archive emerges only when the private value of its contents begins to diminish, so that it ceases to be a vehicle for factional battles.

It is, of course, unsurprising that a volume about letters should turn out to be first and foremost a book about people and the convolutions of their relationships with other people. The letters that generate most interest are those in which the lines of communication are indirect—not A writing to B, but A's letter to B as read, intercepted, deciphered, forged, endorsed, or archived by C, D, and E. Most of the motives on display in this volume are ulterior, or are conditioned by a fear of the ulterior, of what might be made of the document in time. Materiality becomes palpable in relation to this ulteriority: in the letter's anticipation of its possible futures or its transformation in altered circumstances. The other main guise of the material is much more direct, passing straight from A to B, usually via the body. This is the materiality of the letter that hopes to buttonhole you with its Ciceronian rhetoric, that (like Sidney) threatens to stick a dagger into you, or that (with Christopher Brooke) proposes more scatological forms of violence. The tangible letter, this thing of ink and wax and paper that can be transported and broken open and thrown into the fire, repeatedly gives rise to more spectral forms of materiality, in which the absent writer seems to become present. When the Prince of Salina finishes reading the letter that "magically evoked his nephew's face," we are told that "his admiration for Tancredi's tact knew no bounds." What this collection ultimately demonstrates is the intimate relationship between tact and the tactile in letter-writing—which is why early modern letters continue to be so touching today.

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